



(U) Serving Two Masters: The Yin and Yang of It

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An insider's take on working as an Agency representative in DC (U//FOUO)

(U) It was only after I arrived downtown as an NSA liaison to a customer agency that I experienced the feeling of being pulled in two directions. You hear about the need to serve the customer, to develop a relationship with the customer, to find out about the customer's needs, and to manage customer expectations. However, for most of us "downtowners" the challenge of meeting those same requirements for our other customers -- the OPIs* and others back at the Fort -- truly hits when you are sitting in the downtown customer's spaces.

(U) Washington-area positions are considered field positions - but they're definitely "infield" -- and headquarters can reach out and grab you much more readily than if you were across the country or overseas. And that proximity creates competition for your time and a constant need to balance the demands of the customer here with the customer there. You feel the press to get back to the Fort more often for meetings, training, and discussions with OPIs and with your parent organization since you are only 20 or so miles away. But time with one customer means time away from the other.

(U) Nobody comes to a downtown job fully prepared. Building relationships is a core skill and duty. Sometimes it means developing new connections with SID elements. Other times it means intensifying the relationships you already have. And as a downtown representative, you have to be knowledgeable about disciplines beyond SID since downtown customers see you as the face of NSA and expect you to reach back and get them help no matter the issue -- reporting, information assurance, agency policy, security, telecommunications or foreign relations.

(U) Policy-making customers often are less aware of what NSA is about than are Intelligence Community or military customers and they depend on you more to make the contacts they need. Knowing the right contacts and where to go for help is important. Some of this knowledge comes with you; the rest comes with time in the field and often by trial and error. Even for a longtime SIGINTer like me, the learning opportunities have been endless.

(U) The biggest challenge is keeping the customers both at home and at your site happy. They all want and need services and information that enable them to perform their jobs better, and they see you as the provider of both. **Feedback is the answer.** Feedback on the SIGINT from your on-site customer is key to aiding the OPIs in understanding the customer's needs, in prioritizing their workload, and in gaining satisfaction from their work, knowing it has had an impact. Feedback to your downtown customers helps to manage customer expectations by providing them an understanding of what the Agency can and cannot do for them. And feedback to the Customer Relationships Directorate provides it with key information to help drive its business at hand.

(U) All in all, a downtown assignment can be demanding, but educational, meaningful, and rewarding as well. The key to success is keeping the key master -- NSA -- in focus, and maintaining balance. The challenge is considerable but well worth taking during your career.

*(U) Note:
OPI = Office of Primary Interest

(U) You never know who you will run into in Washington...

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